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ABSTRACT

Recent social and political changes in the USSR have made available some 60 previously unreleased films, which were produced during the last 20 years and withheld from release by the Union of Soviet Filmmakers. In 1986, much of this group's leadership was removed leading to an atmosphere more favorable to wider distribution. Some of these films have now been released within the USSR. One of these newly available films, "Scarecrow", by Rolan Bykov, is attracting large audiences. It concerns moral issues, childrens' cruelty to one another, and adult indifference, all controversial subjects not usually portrayed in Soviet films. Opposing reviews of the film have been published, a policy not customary in the past. Other themes found in these films include the evils of Stalinism (especially as represented in "Repentance," directed by Tengis Abuladze), World War II and nuclear war. Animated films for children are being successfully marketed abroad, as are Soviet films generally. A discussion of several films is included in this brief review, a 13-item bibliography is provided, and rental information for Soviet films is listed. (NL)

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SOVIET CINEMA

by

Elizabeth Talbot

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SOVIET CINEMA

The Soviet silent cinema of the twenties--the work of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko and others--occupies a renowned place in the history of world cinema. While experimenting with imaginative techniques such as dramatic montages and developing new theories of acting, Soviet directors advanced the art of film and expanded its boundaries. However, with the mandatory adherence to the tenets of "socialist realism" in the thirties, the creativity of the filmmakers was blunted, and hackeneyed films about the "great leaders," cheerful peasants, and heroes of socialist labor became the norm. During the war when film studios were moved to areas far from the front, imaginative techniques were sometimes used to compensate for a lack of standard equipment, and more raw emotion returned to the screen. Unfortunately, the postwar period was hard on the arts, and film production declined as rules were tightened and directors harshly attacked. "Ivan the Terrible, Part II," directed by Eisenstein, was put on the shelf for ten years. The film portrayed Ivan, not as a strong leader using tough policies dictated by historical goals, but as a weak, confused man with a dissolute group of supporters. Such an interpretation of a powerful leader was not acceptable to Stalin. However, after his death a refreshing breeze moved through the cinema industry. Studios expanded in all of the republics and this probably aided the diversification process. Individual styles developed, more personal themes were introduced, and films such as "Ballad of a Soldier" were well received abroad. Still, there were limitations and some directors found that their works were not acceptable to the authorities. For example, Konchalovsky's "Asya's Happiness," a film about a crippled village girl who refuses the conventional fate of an unmarried mother, revealed too well the difficult conditions of village life and was shelved. Konchalovsky then turned to the Russian literary classics and produced sensitive renderings of the works of Turgenev and Chekhov. Tarkovsky's "Andrei Rublev" about the famous icon painter was held for four years and then released in France. Later it received a limited distribution within the Soviet Union, and it has been available in the United States for several years.

Only last year did we learn how many films had been censored at the postproduction stage or released for strictly limited distribution to selected audiences. When the Union of Soviet Filmmakers held its May 1986 meeting, two-thirds of the "old guard" leadership of the union was ousted, and Elem Klimov, who had not even been nominated for the post, was elected director of the union. One of the first decisions of the new leadership was to form a Conflict Committee, which was to examine sixty films that had been held on the shelf, a few of them for as long as twenty years. Some were of poor quality and others are now outdated, but many have been released for general distribution. To be fair, it should be noted that a number of previously held films such as German's "Trial on the Road" (1971) had been released in 1985. However, last year the whole problem of films being held back was brought into the open, and it was decided that Goskino, the state film committee, would no longer have the power to withhold completed productions. Furthermore, in December the head of Goskino was replaced by Kamshalov, who is known to be in favor of a broader, more open policy for the arts.

Western observers are eager to learn the fate of the film, "Repentance," directed by Tengis Abuladze. It has been released in the director's native Georgia and shown to select audiences in Moscow. Felicity Barringer has described the film as "a strong emotional denunciation of evil. It melds reality, allegory, hallucination and grotesque fantasy to describe a totalitarian dictator and a society out to destroy not just its people but its past." Stalin is not named, but the references to persecution and false arrests are clear. Furthermore, the generation that remained silent about this period is condemned. Other films have hinted at this theme, but one hopes that a general release of "Repentance" will indicate that the Soviets are now ready to come to terms with this period of their history. To be sure, the techniques used in this film will no doubt inhibit its appeal to a mass audience, but the ramifications of open discussions of the film could be very significant.

A film need not deal with Stalinism, be held on the shelf, or appeal only to art house audiences to be controversial. One of the most discussed films in recent years, "Scarecrow," directed by Rolan Bykov, has drawn more than sixty million viewers in the Soviet Union. In the film, youngsters torment a new schoolmate, who has accepted the blame for something done by her boyfriend. Unaware of her innocence, the class even burns an effigy of her. Although there is a lot of talk about moral issues, the adults are shown to be indifferent to the cruelty of the children. The debates about the films say a lot about Soviet society and its understanding of the nature and purpose of creative works. The Literary Gazette published two diametrically opposed views of the film. In one, a retired policeman berated the film as being too sensational and wrong in its focus. He insisted that the behavior of the youngsters was an aberration and completely unrealistic. Moreover, he argued that brutal acts by children should not be shown on the screen. Plus, in his opinion, the heroine is unacceptable because she acts on her own and this, he argues, "is at variance with the essence and all the principles of communist upbringing." What this reviewer calls "real art" presents "a clearly expressed goal, lofty inspiration, a strong patriotic influence, clarity and intelligibility." He is obviously a member of the mainstream "old guard." The second reviewer, a mother and educator, offered a different interpretation of the heroine, arguing that she was acting against evil and ultimately for the collective, since the group of youngsters do finally come to their senses. While the educator agrees that art should "stir people," she is willing to let it do so through the portrayal of negative as well as positive actions, provided that they make the viewer reflect on them. She charges that "by depriving children of experience--even that of a moviegoer--we are raising people who are incapable of deciding to take any real action." In her view, it is wrong to declare all ugly incidents in life to be atypical. What is important to realize here is that neither reviewer focused on the artistic merits of the film, but following a long tradition in Russian criticism, used the film to discuss some societal concerns and values. Of course, these people are not film critics, but the fact that a major newspaper published these types of commentaries illustrates the serious attention given to issues raised in creative works.

Obviously, not all films provoke social comment. As in our own country, there are many light comedies and musicals with little substance that are viewed simply as diversions. The Georgians are especially renowned for rollicking comedies. The Soviets also produce adventure stories and spy thrillers with titles such as "In the Shadow of Death," "Flight 222," "The Detached Mission," "Solo Voyage," and "The Adventures of Madame Wong." They are light on plot, heavy on action with lots of chase scenes, and of course, the antagonists are most often Americans. They are made for a mass audience at home, as are most of the documentaries such as the recent one about Andropov.

However, some documentaries such as "The Forbidden Zone," which offers a penetrating look at the world of juvenile delinquents behind bars, can be very impressive as are a number of serious films with a problematic handling of subjects. An example of the latter is Adbrashitov's "The Train Stopped," in which an accident is investigated and the question of responsibility and loyalty raised. A provocative film, which has been released for export is "Letters from a Dead Man," on the post-nuclear theme. The reviewer for Variety described it "as intense as 'The Day After' but a more cerebral effort." It begins after the fatal button has been pushed by accident from the Soviet side. The message is clearly anti-war.

It is surprising to most Americans to learn that World War II is still such a dominant theme or background for a number of Soviet films produced each year. Some of these are overblown tear-jerkers; others are made by directors trying to broaden the previous black and white treatment of the war theme. For example, German's film, "Trial on the Road," which was made in 1971 and released only in 1985, has as its hero a Red Army sergeant who becomes a Nazi collaborator and then is determined to prove his loyalty to his own country and regain respect by fighting with a partisan division. In doing so, he dies a hero's death. In the past, a collaborator could not be allowed to redeem himself on a Soviet screen. Another recent film, Klimov's "Come and See," which is currently being shown in this country, is an emotional film about the brutality of the Nazi occupation of Byelorussia as seen through the eyes of a young partisan. Unfortunately, film includes some inappropriate footage from a Nazi concentration camp, but it is important to note that the film is based not simply on the heroics of the Soviets but the horror of war itself.

The majority of Soviet films have no special effects or overt depiction of violence. Instead they offer reliable plot lines, an emphasis on positive values, and human interest stories of the sort welcomed by most families. Especially good are many of the films for children, some of which feature clever animation. For this reason, Soviet films have begun to sell well abroad, especially to countries looking for films be to aired on their national television broadcasts. The entertainment is wholesome, and no one will be offended by explicit scenes of sex and/or violence. In the past, the Soviets have been reluctant to export any films which included criticisms of Soviet life, fearing that they would automatically be misconstrued as anti-Soviet. However, as they loosen restrictions on works released within their own borders, one hopes that they will have the maturity to export their most interesting films to the United States.

Elizabeth Talbot

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II. Recent articles in journals

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Green, Peter, "The Nostalgia of the Stalker," Sight and Sound: International Film Quarterly, 1984/85 Winter, pp. 50-54.

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Stanbrook, Alan, "The Return of Paradjanov," Sight and Sound: International Film Quarterly, 55, Autumn 1986, pp. 257-8.

III. Newspaper articles

Barringer, Felicity, "'Repentance,' a Soviet Film Milestone Strongly Denounces Official Evil," The New York Times November 16, 1986, sec. 2, pp. 1 and 17.

Pitman, Jack. "Soviets Oust Film Head Yermash in Move to Open Cultural Doors," Variety, December 31, 1986, pp. 3 and 69.

"'Scarecrow'--What Are the Film's Lessons?" The Current Digest of the Soviet Press, 37, No. 25, pp. 7-9 (Translated from Literaturnaya gazeta).

Schemann, Serge, "Winds of Change Stir Soviet Film," The New York Times (Arts and Leisure), October 12, 1986, pp. 1 and 3.

Young, Deborah, "Soviet Filmers Abolish State Censor System," Variety, October 1, 1986, p. 122.

Reviews of current films may be found in Variety. Lengthy reviews of older filsm can be found in Magill's Survey of Cinema published in several volumes in 1985. Soviet films can be rented from IFEX (201 West 52 Street, New York, NY 10019). Videotapes of the Soviet classics and some films of the seventies can be purchased from Facets Multimedia, Inc. (1517 W. Fullerton Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614).

The Kennan Institute sponsored a conference on Soviet cinema in September 1986. Papers given at that conference should be available later this year. (KIARS/The Wilson Center, Smithsonian Institution, 955 L'Enfant Plaza, SW, Suite 7400, Washington, DC 20560.)

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An NEH Summer Institute in Russian Language and Culture will be held at Bryn Mawr College, June 22-July 19. Participants will be provided room and board at the Russian language residential house and each partipant will receive a weekly stipend of $200. Send requests for applications to: NEH Institute, CORLAC, Friends School, 5114 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21210. Or call Zita D. Dabars at (301) 435-2800.